The Impact of Early Childhood Teacher Education
How to Answer the Unanswerable Question

Examining the Early Childhood Teacher Education Landscape

PUBLIC AWARENESS OF THE VALUE OF A HIGH QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION has never been stronger with Nobel-prize winning economist James J. Heckman declaring that it is the key to our nation's future. Higher education's role in preparing teachers to deliver on that promise is significant and continues to grow. With attention to the importance of teachers have come powerful critiques (NCATE, 2010) and debate about whether early childhood teacher preparation programs are capable of preparing 21ST century early educators.

A special issue of the *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education* addresses this critically important question: For whom and in what ways does early childhood teacher education matter? An article in the issue by an FPG researcher and colleagues examined the current research base in early childhood teacher education to try to answer that question. The review concludes that the lack of rigorous research evidence is a major challenge. Much of the research that exists is descriptive and focused on small samples of students in a few innovative programs.

The Interconnected Influences on the Quality of ECTE

One of the reasons that research is scant is the complexity involved in trying to study this question. Within the higher education system, the elements of faculty, content, and pedagogy exert interconnected influences on graduates. Additionally, each program's institutional setting, specific program/degree type, and available resources also impact the characteristics and quality of ECTE, as do an array of national and state standards, policies, and certification requirements. Moreover, once graduates enter the classroom, their preparation becomes only one of many influences on their practices, which in turn impact child and family outcomes.

UNC
FRANK PORTER GRAHAM
CHILD DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

Method

The authors explore this issue by focusing on three domains of ECTE:

1. addressing the needs of young children with disabilities and their families;
2. understanding and working effectively with infants and toddlers; and,
3. building young children's competence and interest in mathematics.

Each domain is critically important in the preparation of tomorrow's early childhood teachers; each has often been under-emphasized in ECTE programs; and, research in each has been inadequate.

Common Themes

The review of research across the three domains reveals the following themes, which suggest some of the challenges in implementing evidence-based practices in ECTE programs and in understanding the impact of the programs:

1. Accreditation of ECTE programs is voluntary, which has limited the benefits of state and national attempts at quality assurance.
2. There is a dearth of research about the barriers and facilitators for faculty in implementing high-quality college curricula that align with evidence-based practice.
3. Preservice students in ECTE programs receive limited coursework in key content areas, such as working with children with disabilities, infants and toddlers, and math.
4. No system is in place to ensure the use of evidence-based approaches in preparing teachers. There are numerous published examples of "beacons of excellence": promising IHE programs and approaches for preparing students to work with young children. However, rather than a nationwide system of evidence-based approaches for preparing teachers to enter the field, in the words of a 2010 NCATE report, we instead have "a cottage industry of path breaking initiatives."
5. There is little follow-up of preservice students once they have entered the field. Missing are measures of: a) teacher competence, b) the fidelity of implementation of effective practices by student teachers, and c) faculty use of emerging, evidence-based curricula.

In conclusion, we cannot yet answer questions about the impact of ECTE programs on teachers or on the children they serve.

Future Research on ECTE

In each of the important areas of ECTE discussed here, research is insufficient to provide a guide for faculty and higher education policymakers. The gaps in research indicate the following priorities, most of which have relevance to many areas of teacher preparation beyond the scope of this review but whose evidence bases are similarly challenged:

1. Develop systematic approaches to data collection on critical content-area requirements in early childhood teacher education.
2. Move beyond counting courses and credits to examine patterns in course content, methods, and field experiences.
3. Develop, field test, and rigorously evaluate innovative, evidence-based approaches to ECTE.
4. Develop and evaluate a variety of tools to assess preservice students' competencies, beliefs, and attitudes.
5. Develop, field test, and rigorously evaluate practical approaches to faculty development.

As we look ahead, ECTE research will need a more facilitative environment to operationalize these priorities. This environment must include: collaboration among those who are skilled in qualitative and quantitative research; a coherent, programmatic research agenda; a well-prepared pipeline of future ECTE researchers, prepared both in content and in the array of methods needed to conduct high-quality research; support from funders and policymakers to build the capacity to train researchers and conduct necessary research; and, focused attention on implementation science to help faculty and institutions thoughtfully *apply* the results of research on ECTE.

In the end, collective efforts across disciplines and methodological boundaries likely will produce the knowledge required to ensure the most effective approaches to ECTE and, as a result, help us to articulate *for whom and in what ways* ECTE matters. ■

To Learn More

Horm, D., Hyson, M., & Winton, P. (2013). Research on early childhood teacher education: Evidence from three domains and recommendations for moving forward. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education, 34* (1) 95-112.